

12-1-1937

A Pioneer Christmas Tree

Cora Call Whitney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Whitney, Cora C. "A Pioneer Christmas Tree." *The Palimpsest* 18 (1937), 381-388.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol18/iss12/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XVIII ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1937 NO. 12

COPYRIGHT 1937 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



A Pioneer Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree was introduced in this country by the settlers of German descent, who cherished the Christmas traditions of their fatherland. Immigrants from other countries transplanted similar customs. Thus the Latin peoples liked to gather around the ornate manger or creche in their churches. Gradually, however, the fitness and adaptability of the beautiful tree of gifts as the center of the holiday festival became evident to everybody. When it was adopted by the Sunday Schools as a happy means of rewarding youthful piety and an incentive to regular attendance, its place as an American institution was secure.

Not until the civic activities connected with the World War drew communities together as never before, was the value of the community Christmas tree recognized. Here was a common symbol of unity for all citizens, for rich and poor of every race. There was something inspiring in the very idea of the lighted tree in a park or public square,

not planned by a church for its own people, but out in the open where all stood together under the stars, children of one Father. Folks said, "Why didn't we do something of this kind long ago?"

In truth there were community Christmas trees in Iowa long before the World War. The pioneers in Franklin County had one 1868. This was not an outdoor celebration, for that would have seemed preposterous with snow lying deep all over the country, yet it was truly a community tree.

There was not at that time a church edifice in the county but there was a substantial stone courthouse at Hampton the county-seat, not an unusual condition among the newly organized counties in Iowa. Herbert Quick, in *The Hawkeye* dealing with this general period, shows how the prompt building of courthouses, made easier by the generous taxes assessed upon non-resident land owners, not only helped insure the permanence of the location of the county-seat, but offered decided advantages to local business interests.

In the court room on the second floor of the courthouse at Hampton the churches of the three denominations already represented in that prairie village held their services, judiciously taking turns in the morning and afternoon on Sunday. This could be planned as all three pastors, like most pioneer ministers, had several preaching stations.

A group including members of all these churches conceived the idea of a Christmas tree in the courthouse for everybody. But a serious question immediately arose. How and where could a tree be secured? In all Franklin County there was not in those days, as far as any one knew, a native evergreen. The nearest railroad station was more than fifteen miles away and even if it had been closer, little pine trees would not have been shipped in by the carload as they are now. Presently, some one remembered that over on the Iowa River, eighteen or twenty miles away, there was quite a lot of cedar. When the time came, my father, the Reverend L. N. Call, volunteered to go for the Christmas tree if some one who knew the country would go with him. The weather was very cold but he and "Deacon" Allen Green brought back in triumph a great shaggy cedar and set it up in the court room.

On Christmas Eve the place was jammed. People came from all over the surrounding countryside bringing their children for this wonderful event. While that was a long time ago and I was only six years old, I can still see that tree, bright with candles, adorned with popcorn garlands and here and there a red apple. On the branches and around the base were mysterious packages and bundles. No tree since has seemed so marvelous.

The children could hardly wait during "the preliminary exercises" — singing, Scripture reading, and prayer. Those packages might hold anything! There was one large china doll with glittering black hair and a bright red dress which was an instant magnet for the eyes of every little girl.

In later years I asked father what songs were sung, for in recalling pioneer days it is rather surprising to note how small a place Christmas had in the music of church services. Perhaps it was a legacy of that suspicion of "holy days" which made the Puritans shun even the mince pies of English tradition. An examination of the hymnals published in the forties and fifties by several denominations reveals few Christmas hymns. In one book, very generally used in New England during the sixties, the only example was "Calm on the Listening Ear of Night", set to music so involved that it is not surprising to find that page in the much-worn book quite clean. In the hymnal of another denomination the words of "Joy to the World" were included, though not set to music. The Methodist hymnal of 1849 contained a number of hymns on the incarnation and birth of Christ, more doctrinal than those now commonly used. Later, when choirs and organs appeared in Iowa churches, "Joy to the World" set to the triumphant strains of "Antioch" was the crowning

effort of the singers on the Sunday nearest Christmas.

It was not only in the music of the churches, however, that Christmas seemed forgotten. Carols were an even later importation. A prized possession, given me some forty-five years ago by Charles Aldrich, is a copy of the *Golden Wreath* published in Cincinnati in the early fifties and, as its title page announces, consisting of "250 Favorite Songs, designed for use by Schools Academies and Seminaries". Among them all, ranging from "Billy Boy" to "Be Kind to Your Mother" there is not a hint of Christmas. It is not strange, perhaps, that in all the wide scope of the contents of the McGuffey's readers, so generally used seventy years ago, Christmas is not mentioned!

Talking it over with my father, many years later, I asked him, "What *did* they sing?"

"Probably Coronation", he suggested. "They would all know the words of that — 'All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name'."

The Scripture reading, no doubt, was that story ever new, read in thousands of churches every Christmas: "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. . . ."

At long last, on that first community Christmas

Eve at Hampton, came the distribution of presents. The committee had provided a sack of candy for each child; parents and Sunday School teachers had brought other gifts; and there were offerings for some of the old and needy. I remember hearing my parents tell of the joy with which an aged Englishman received a pound of tea, his one great luxury.

My little sister and I were each given, in addition to the bag of candy, a "shell-box", which was a favorite gift of those days. It was a little box neatly covered with dainty sea-shells and with a mirror inside the lid. One of them is still preserved. When I tried to explain its value to my little granddaughter, she remarked, "Oh yes, something like a compact." And I reflected that we shouldn't have known what she meant by a "compact".

After the presents had been distributed, a program of recitations and songs seemed appropriate. Spontaneously the informal entertainment began. Some one recited C. C. Moore's immortal "The Night before Christmas" — forerunner of the Christmas songs and poems that have followed. Yet through the years this simple, jolly poem has held its charm, perhaps not less because of the smiling interest with which the children watch for the haste with which a self-conscious little speaker

slides over the embarrassing description of Santa Claus's physical proportions. Not so much, however, in these days of few inhibitions among the young!

Then one of the men who was managing the affair called for some music and lamented that in this place where all public gatherings were held there was no "instrument" — the general term then for a piano, melodeon, or cabinet organ. Lacking such facilities, he asked "Jim Thompson's girls" to sing something, and the three sisters, daughters of a local contractor, obligingly sang "The Birdie's Ball". Then, having noticed that a couple who had just been married that afternoon were present, he called for "a song from the bride!" With slight hesitation she went forward and sang in her clear strong voice:

I saw a young bride
In her beauty and pride
Bedecked in her snowy array . . .

This (like many other details of the evening) I should not have remembered without the aid of my family. As I read the words of the song in later years it seemed a rather mournful selection for that occasion, for by the end of the first stanza when we "see her again" she "has changed her white robes for the sables of woe". But evidently the pioneers of Franklin County saw nothing in-

congruous in Mrs. Dana's pathetic lines as sung by that happy girl. The remainder of the evening is lost in a vague impression of growing very sleepy and being carried out to the sleigh, still clutching my treasures.

Last summer I met a lady, probably about my own age, who lives at Hampton and, as we recalled the old times there, it transpired that she, too, remembered that first Christmas tree. Her father, living six or seven miles in the country, was one of the many who drove in through the deeply drifted roads so that the children might see the Christmas tree. Each of us could contribute something to the memories of the other as we recalled that evening: I could tell about the songs; she remembered the sensation caused by a young man giving a gold watch to his sweetheart; and we both remembered the doll with the red dress.

And we agreed that our "Christmas tree for everybody", with its gifts and "exercises", would seem very crude and simple compared to the elaborate music and pageantry of present-day Christmas festivals. Nevertheless, it probably expressed as much or more of the feeling of neighborliness and good-will which belong to the day.

CORA CALL WHITLEY